

UNCLASSIFIED

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Sent: Thursday, April 11, 2002 4:59 PM
To: Fingar, Thomas; Struble, Curt; Gilchrist, Robert S(D); Hammer, Michael A(P); O'Reilly, Kevin M (WHA); Naranjo, Brian R; Friedman, Bruce W; Farrar, Jonathan D
Cc: Buchanan, James E; McElveen, James N; Kirsch, David E; Croft, Jennifer
Subject: Venezuela Spot Report

Classification: SECRET

(U) Opposition protesters are gathered outside Miraflores palace in downtown Caracas to demand President Chávez's resignation. The massive demonstration has been joined by similar protests in cities across the nation and is part of a general strike declared two days ago by the country's main labor federation with the support of business and dissident workers of the state-owned oil company, PDVSA. It is the most powerful challenge to his presidency to date, with the number of protesters in Caracas placed in the hundreds of thousands, according to press. National Guard troops are positioned outside the palace for protection, along with an undetermined number of pro-Chávez supporters.

(U) The demonstration has been generally peaceful and orderly, but local TV media have reported some violence between security forces and radical, pro-Chavez students holed up in the Central University of Venezuela, and police have fired tear gas to keep some anti-government marchers away from the palace.

(U) The military high command earlier made a public appeal for calm; an appeal reiterated by the Attorney General, who also offered to mediate the conflict. President Chávez, however, has responded with typical defiance. In an ongoing nationally televised address, he blames the current crisis on the media and charges media owners for inciting violence. He announced that three broadcast stations have been forcibly taken off the air; press reports three more have been cut off.

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